Nurses are at risk of failing to learn about the latest developments in patient care because staffing pressures and lack of employer support mean they have no time for continuing professional development (CPD).

Two thirds of the more than 200 respondents to a social media poll by Nursing Standard said they receive no protected time for CPD from their employers, while nursing leaders report CPD challenges are increasing for nurses across settings.

Delegates at this year’s RCN congress, held from 2–6 June in Newport, Wales, passed a resolution for the college to lobby governments to make it a statutory duty for all employers to provide contractual, fully funded CPD.

What CPD are nurses required to undertake?

Taking part in CPD is a core part of the Nursing and Midwifery Council’s (NMC) revalidation process, whether a nurse is employed in the NHS or the private or voluntary sectors.

Nurses must complete at least 35 hours of CPD relevant to their scope of practice every three years to remain on the NMC register.

Twenty of those hours must include participatory learning, which the NMC defines as undertaking an activity that involves interaction with one or more professionals. This can be in a physical environment or a virtual one – you do not have to be in the same room as the people with whom you are undertaking the activity.

There is a fair degree of flexibility as to what counts as a CPD activity. It can be structured learning, an accredited training programme, a workshop or conference, or coaching or mentoring – all of which are classed as participatory learning.

Reading and reviewing publications counts as individual CPD. Social media activity, such as chats on X,
The NMC and NHS Employers recommend employers enable staff to undertake CPD—but there is no legal requirement.

However, both the NMC and NHS Employers recommend employers offer staff the opportunity to undertake CPD. In England and Wales if you are an employee of an organisation with 250 or more staff, you have a statutory right to request time for study or training, if you have been continuously employed there for at least 26 weeks. An employer can refuse your request if they have a good business reason.

This is also the case in Scotland, but in addition RCN Scotland secured a commitment to protected time for learning as part of the Agenda for Change reforms agreed in the 2023-24 NHS Scotland pay deal. Implemented from 1 April this year, it requires NHS health boards to ensure protected time for statutory, mandatory and profession-specific learning.

RCN Scotland director Colin Poolman says the provision of protected time was part of a package of measures included in the Principles for CPD and Lifelong Learning in Health and Care, by The Interprofessional CPD and Lifelong Learning UK Working Group.

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What about mandatory training—does that count? Mandatory training that is not directly related to an individual’s practice, for example fire training or health and safety training, cannot be included in CPD hours. But mandatory training that is within an individual’s scope of practice and professional development, such as training on equality legislation if the person is in a policy role, or safeguarding for someone working with vulnerable adults, could be.

What are employers required to do to support nurses’ CPD? Mandatory training is counted as working time under the Working Time Regulations 1998 and therefore should be counted in an employee’s normal hours. But there is no legal requirement for employers to provide paid time off for or cover the costs of CPD for nurses’ revalidation.

How to reach your CPD hours target

» Don’t wait until the last minute Explore continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities throughout the three-year revalidation period

» Use your annual appraisal to discuss CPD with your manager and identify opportunities for the coming year

» Remind managers that you need to do CPD and of the expectation of the Nursing and Midwifery Council and NHS Employers that they support staff

» Make the point that CPD leads to better service delivery and benefits service users – as set out in the Principles for CPD and Lifelong Learning in Health and Care, by The Interprofessional CPD and Lifelong Learning UK Working Group

» Think creatively about how to gain CPD hours through activities such as taking part in a consultation or social media debates

» Look for free courses RCNi Learning has a range of options – rcnilearning.com

What difficulties are nurses facing in undertaking CPD? Concerns have been growing in recent years that nurses are not being properly supported or given the time needed to do CPD. In 2019, an evaluation by Ipsos Mori showed 44% of nurses and midwives found it difficult to find time for CPD at the point of revalidation and only 60% felt their employer helped them enough.

Queen’s Nursing Institute chief executive Crystal Oldman says those not working for big acute trusts find it the most difficult. ‘We are increasingly hearing about the challenges of being released for CPD from all areas in the community, including general practice,’ she says.

‘Money has been invested into training hubs to allow general practice nurses to access CPD, but the problem comes when they apply to get released from their day job to do the training.

‘In a hospital where there are hundreds of staff and access to bank and agency staff it is much easier to backfill nurses who are having training’

Crystal Oldman, Queen’s Nursing Institute chief executive
‘In a hospital when there are hundreds of staff and access to bank and agency staff it is much easier to manage and to backfill nurses who are having training – when you have six nurses or even fewer it is much more difficult.’

Testimonies on social media also point to problems. The Nursing Standard poll on X found that two thirds of respondents were given no time off to complete their CPD, and just 22% were given 12 or more hours. Nurses complained of having to fight to get support to attend training and development events.

**What do the professional bodies say about CPD responsibilities?**

The NMC expects employers to be supportive, but it is clear that the responsibility to complete CPD lies ultimately with the individual nurse.

NMC senior nursing education adviser Julie Bliss says: ‘As nurses, it’s our responsibility to keep our knowledge and skills up to date, so we can provide the safe, kind and effective care that the public has the right to expect.’

But she says employers should be fully supportive and help their staff. ‘It’s vital nursing and midwifery professionals have access to CPD opportunities that are adequately supported by employers, so they can regularly learn and reflect on their practice to maintain high quality care throughout their careers.’

The regulator says there are many different ways to clock up the hours – and nurses do not have to rely solely on traditional training courses and events than require time away from work.

The RCN is concerned about the current situation. Training grants for CPD for individual nurses worth £333 a year have been offered in England over the past four years, but it is not clear if this will be made available this year, although NHS England said it was committed to providing funding.

And the motion passed at congress means the RCN will now lobby for a commitment that goes a step further: fully-funded CPD.

Speaking before congress, RCN head of education Gill Coverdale said: ‘Undertaking CPD is a vital part of the NMC revalidation process, helping to ensure staff remain skilled, knowledgeable and up to date.

‘It’s essential, therefore, that employers provide staff with the time and resources to develop their skills. But with tens of thousands of vacant nursing posts in the NHS and even more across the independent sector, we know that staff face increasing challenges getting financial support and approval to take the time they need.

‘There is also a lack of consistency in access to opportunities, particularly in the independent sector. With a recruitment and retention crisis across health and care, employers need to prioritise allowing staff to develop their skills and ultimately improve patient care.’

See the results of our poll on X: tinyurl.com/ns-poll-cpd

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We know nursing staff are time poor and overstretched, so our online resources and articles aim to make your path to CPD and revalidation a bit easier. Here are three steps you can take right now:

- Find out what CPD you can access online as part of your RCNi subscription: rcni.com/build-cpd-hours
- Check out our new-look RCNi Learning platform, where you can choose from 170 learning modules to help meet your required 35 hours of CPD for revalidation: rcnilearning.com
- Register for Nursing Live, a unique nursing event in Liverpool hosted by RCNi, where you can benefit from hours of CPD and inspiration: nursinglive.com